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SUBJECT: LIMITED OPPORTUNITY EXISTS FOR WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN
HONDURAN POLITICAL PROCESS

11. Summary: Opportunities for women to participate in Honduran politics remains quite limited, particularly for those seeking elected office. While women account for well over half of the Honduran population, they hold only a fraction of elected positions, both on the national and local level. Despite limited attempts at reform to boost the number of women holding elected office, Honduran politics remains a male-dominated hierarchy inherently resistant to change. End Summary.

12. Although women secured the right to vote in Honduras in 1954 and account for an estimated 57 percent of the Honduran population, few have made it past the ballot box when it comes to elected office. In the Honduran National Congress, nine out of 128 representatives are women, a mere 7 percent. On the local level, only 27 of 298 mayors are women. In contrast to congressional representatives, however, the number of women mayors has steadily increased through the past three elections. Despite these improvements, when electoral law reform was enacted during the 2001 elections fewer women overall were elected to office. (On a positive note, even though the overall number of female judges remains small, due to a modified selection process, nine of 15 members of the Supreme Court are women, including the Chief Justice.)

13. Current Honduran law stipulates that 30 percent of government jobs (including elected offices) should go to women, although this has never been enforced. Political parties, for instance, have a 30 percent requirement for women to be placed on their party list. However, political parties can easily put women at the bottom of the list, giving them a minimal chance to be selected. This situation may change with the introduction of direct election of congressional representatives, as a result of electoral law reform passed in March 2004 (which has still yet to be officially published). Photos will be placed on ballots encouraging the electorate to change its political party patronage perspective to focusing on individual candidates. Nevertheless, while many women do work in government jobs, the "glass ceiling" remains low, generally limiting them to non-decision making positions. Also, women tend to be paid less than men for the same type of work even in government jobs.

14. On March 31, a motion in Congress, supported by women's rights groups that would have mandated equal representation between men and women in high-level political office, was soundly defeated, gaining only 46 votes. While the motion was never expected to pass, those campaigning for change considered the fact that it was even brought up for a vote a victory.

15. On the local level, an event was held February 26 by the National Association for Municipal Women of Honduras (ANAMMUH) in order to appeal for increased women's participation in the political process. On March 8, the National Institute of the Woman (INAM), a cabinet-level women's ministry, commemorated 2004 as the "Year of the Political Rights of Honduran Women." While women's groups would like to see greater participation by women in government, many Honduran women are apathetic about pursuing greater political participation.

16. Comment: Although women's groups in Honduras are pushing for change and some strides have been made, deeply ingrained Honduran cultural norms continue to severely restrict opportunities for women in politics, particularly at higher levels. Many women not only continue to view their role in traditional ways, accepting a male-dominated hierarchy with little dissent, but also are constrained by a political system influenced by personal interests and not deeply rooted in democratic values. This barrier to participation is further aggravated by an ineffective public educational system that has not been able to create opportunities and instill one's sense of choices and responsibilities. Thus, expanded grassroots training and increased educational opportunities, particularly in rural areas, will be necessary before Honduran women can be expected to assume greater influence over political decisions that affect their daily lives. Recent electoral law reform passed in March 2004 may provide the opportunity for significant change; however, this will take time since both the electorate and politicians are not yet familiar with the law. End Comment.

Pierce